

## **Few thirst for recycled tap water, survey says**

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You don't mind using recycled sewer water to keep golf courses lush. It can even be used by factories to manufacture goods. You even like the idea of returning water that went down the drain to the bathroom to flush the toilet.

But the closer it actually gets to you, the less palatable it is. And you still hate the idea of having it come out of the tap.

Those were the results of a recently completed survey tracking the attitudes of San Diego County residents on recycled water.

The survey by the San Diego County Water Authority will be used by water planners to chart the county's water future, said Bill Jacoby, the authority's resources manager.

More than 90 percent of respondents agreed with using recycled water for freeway landscaping and golf courses. Eighty-seven percent support bringing it inside buildings to flush toilets. A building housing a pharmaceutical company in Torrey Pines is doing this now.

There is 70 percent approval for using it on crops as agricultural irrigation.

When it comes to pouring it into recreational lakes, support drops to 49 percent. And forget about drinking it. Even with additional treatment, 63 percent oppose using it for potable, or drinkable, water.

Why?

Of the opponents, 34 percent either don't trust or feel uncomfortable with the process. That's followed by 17 percent who are concerned it will affect their health. Seventeen percent said they don't have enough information.

Even though the public remains firmly against drinking recycled water, the acceptance for other uses is encouraging, Jacoby said.

Every gallon of recycled water frees up a gallon of potable water, which can be sent to homes.

The county uses about 13,000 acre-feet of recycled water annually, Jacoby said. One acre-foot equals about 326,000 gallons, enough to serve the needs of two average households for one year.

The bulk of the recycled water is produced by the city of San Diego Water Department at two treatment plants. In the 1990s, the city aggressively pursued the cleaned-up sewage as the solution to the drought that plagued Southern California early in the decade.

The toilet-to-tap plan would have pumped recycled water into a reservoir, which would be treated a second time before it was delivered to customers' taps.

The San Diego City Council killed the program in 1999 in the face of strong public opposition.

The Water Department has not given up on the idea. It is about to embark on a program to increase the use of recycled water in the areas that show strong support.

One treatment plant handles 25 million gallons of sewer water daily. It recycles about 5 million gallons, and the remainder is sent into the ocean.

Unlike the toilet-to-tap plan that was sprung on the public, city water officials plan extensive community outreach to try to convince people of the benefits of recycled water.

San Diegans currently use 200 million gallons daily. That figure is expected to rise 25 percent by 2030. Officials see recycled water as an answer to the anticipated increase.

"They want to go about this very methodically and scientifically," said Kurt Kidman, a Water Department spokesman. "We want this to be a real solution to our long-term needs."

Scientists agree that recycled water can help solve many supply problems. But they warn that the program must be executed carefully.

Dave Schubert, a scientist at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies, said the recycled water is commonly disinfected with chlorine to kill bacteria inherent in sewage.

Many times, water agencies add too much chlorine, which can cause pipes to corrode and irritate the stomach if ingested, Schubert said. On other occasions, not enough chlorine is used, which allows bacteria to live and could cause disease.

Because of these potential errors, he is concerned about bringing cleaned-up sewage closer to humans. He points to instances where recycled water pipes were connected to the plumbing for potable water without the owner's knowledge. As recycled water grows in popularity, these incidents could become more common.

"You should minimize the use in areas where there is a lot of plumbing," said Schubert, who also sits on the San Diego County science advisory board. "In residential neighborhoods, it could be a problem."

The water authority telephone survey of 710 people, 406 of whom were San Diego residents, has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.7 percentage points. The full results of the survey can be viewed on the water authority's Web site [www.sdcwa.org](http://www.sdcwa.org)

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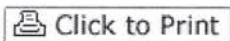
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